

6

MEETING REGIONAL HIGHER EDUCATION NEEDS

6

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Overview

Washington offers a wide array of higher educational opportunities. Residents and communities across the state have sought to share in higher education opportunity by promoting the expansion of these resources. As a result, the state today has many instructional sites: research universities and their branch campuses; regional comprehensive universities and their off-campus learning centers; community and technical colleges and their satellites; and multi-institutional consortia. Meanwhile, private colleges and universities operate in many additional locations. Finally, many colleges are offering electronic distance instruction directly to people's homes and work sites.

The current system has evolved largely in response to changing student demographics, employer demand, community needs, and geographic disparities in students' college attendance. It has not always been planned or implemented in a systematic and prioritized manner.

The responsiveness and effectiveness of Washington's higher education system would be enhanced if the state developed a resource allocation model to respond to local, regional, and state needs with clearly stated priorities. Such an approach could, for example, be used to determine whether a community college should offer upper-division programs; whether a branch campus should admit freshmen and sophomores; or whether specific programs should be created to address regional needs.

In this plan, the Higher Education Coordinating Board is calling for the collaborative development of a unified resource planning and policy framework to:

- Clearly identify and define the existing distribution of higher education resources;
- Explain the purpose and inter-relationship of these resources;
- Establish the criteria and authorities by which these resources could change in response to emerging and changing student and regional needs; and
- Use existing and new resources in a coordinated and flexible manner.

Analysis

Linking goals, needs, and resources

To accomplish the goals of the strategic master plan, the state must identify the specific needs of various regions and devise appropriate strategies. The task of assessing regional needs is not a new undertaking. The creation 15 years ago of the research university branch campuses in Bothell, Tacoma, Vancouver, the Tri-Cities and Spokane is the most visible example of this regional thinking. More recently, the state has acknowledged the importance of meeting regional needs through the allocation of high-demand enrollment funding to projects that respond to unique regional economic development opportunities.

Currently, additional alternatives, including the possible transformation of branch campuses and community colleges into four-year universities, are being considered in several regions.

To address the need for an integrated, collaborative planning vehicle, the HECB will develop a “Higher Education Resource Planning and Approval Policy” by integrating its recently revised statutory authority to (1) develop an assessment process to analyze the need for regional and statewide higher education programs; (2) approve new four-year college degree programs; and (3) approve off-campus facility and real estate acquisition. This policy would clearly designate and differentiate the types of educational programs and resources offered by the public institutions. Additionally, the policy would establish the criteria and process by which the state would authorize the creation and distribution of educational resources in response to demonstrated need.

To that end, a continuum or pathway of educational resources would be recognized in the board’s policy. The points or categories along the pathway represent a progressive approach to providing access and responsiveness to existing needs and providing a framework to meet emerging or changing needs. The pathway would rely on regional-based needs assessments as conducted by the board to demonstrate the need for new or different types of programs and institutions.

Conceptually, three points along the pathway could be envisioned:

(1) Institutions would be authorized by the HECB to assess actual need and demand for new programs by providing limited off-campus courses and/or programs at higher education teaching sites. These sites would offer a limited array of courses and/or programs and would not represent a permanent commitment. Institutions providing programs at teaching sites would not be authorized to own facilities. New teaching sites would be based on a preliminary assessment of statewide and regional needs. Also, the board could call for institutional proposals to create new sites pursuant to regional needs assessments conducted by the board.

(2) As demand increases at existing teaching sites or other underserved regions, institutions could request HECB authorization for the creation of higher education centers. A center could be organized as a multi-institution teaching entity or as a single university/college enterprise – similar to branch campuses. The new board policy would articulate the organizational characteristics and requirements of the centers. Additionally, the new policy would require that the board conduct a regional needs assessment – in consultation with the institutions and communities served – prior to authorizing/designating a higher education center. Existing higher education centers and the upper-division/ graduate level campuses of the University of Washington and Washington State University would be considered in this category.

(3) Four-year colleges and universities that operate upper-division and graduate-level centers could ask the HECB to review the status of a center and recommend that the legislature reclassify it as a college or university, with authority to provide lower- and upper-division and graduate programs. A center could not be reclassified into a college or university unless it demonstrated sufficient enrollment demand as determined by the board. A proposed reclassification would be based upon these general criteria and the board’s regional needs assessment, in consultation with the institutions and communities served.

Community and technical colleges also could ask the HECB to recommend that the legislature reclassify a college as a baccalaureate institution, offering upper-division enrollment and bachelor’s degrees. The same rules for conducting a regional needs assessment would apply.

Implementation Plan

Washington’s higher education system must be realigned and expanded to attain the goals of the 2004 Strategic Master Plan for Higher Education. The board proposes to develop a statewide Higher Education Resource Planning and Approval Policy that will:

- Examine the supply of and demand for higher education programs and facilities;
- Revise the process by which the state evaluates the need for new college degree programs; and
- Integrate the approval of new degree programs with the approval of facilities development and property acquisition for off-campus learning centers and related facilities.

1. The HECB, in collaboration with the legislative fiscal committees and the Office of Financial Management, will develop a simulation model that allows state policy makers to analyze the impact of various enrollment and funding options.

By December 2004, the HECB will complete the simulation model, as directed in the 2004 supplemental budget. The simulation model represents the first step in the development of the statewide and regional needs assessment discussed in the following section.

Estimated costs

No new costs will be required beyond the \$100,000 provided in the 2004 supplemental operating budget.

2. The HECB, with assistance from stakeholders, will complete the needs assessment process outlined in House Bill 3103.

By December 2004, the HECB will establish a project work group with representatives of the State Board for Community and Technical Colleges and the Workforce Training and Education Coordinating Board. The work group will consult with higher education stakeholders to develop criteria for the evaluation of state and regional needs, and report its findings by spring 2005.

By January 2005, the HECB, with assistance from stakeholders, will identify the regions of the state that should be the focus of future data collection and planning initiatives.

By June 2005, the HECB will issue reports on state and regional needs assessments in several high-demand academic fields.

Performance measure

- Completion and publication of plans and reports.

Estimated costs

No new funds will be required during the 2003-05 biennium beyond the funds provided to the HECB in the 2004 supplemental operating budget. Additional funding may be required in 2005-07 and 2007-09 for state and regional needs assessments.

Examples of ongoing related work

- Various groups have met during 2004 to review the requirements of House Bill 3103 and House Bill 2707, both of which were enacted during the 2004 legislative session. The HECB developed guidelines to help the University of Washington and Washington State University develop the reports about their branch campuses required under House Bill 2707. The HECB will receive these reports in November 2004 and will forward them to the legislature and governor in January 2005 after adding its own “policy options.”
- Discussions have begun within the higher education community and with members of the legislature to consider the implications of preserving the state’s current “hourglass” structure – one that concentrates enrollment at the research universities and community and technical colleges – versus moving toward a “pyramid” structure – one that would focus enrollment growth at the regional comprehensive universities.

3. By July 2005, the HECB and the SBCTC will revise their processes for approval of new degree programs at the four-year and two-year colleges and universities. The revised processes will be integrated with the facility and real estate planning and approval policy discussed in the next section.

By February 2005, HECB staff, in consultation with the public four-year colleges and universities, will develop draft guidelines for four-year institution program approval and assessment that reflect state and regional needs assessments.

By June 2005, the HECB and the SBCTC will review and approve updated program review guidelines and notify institutions within their jurisdictions of changes in the review processes. The new policies will be implemented by July 2005.

Performance measures

- HECB and SBCTC approval of revised guidelines for program approval.

Estimated costs

This work will be accomplished within existing resources.

Example of ongoing related work

The four-year institutions’ Council of Presidents has established a committee of instructional leaders to review new academic degree program planning processes and enhanced state and regional planning. HECB staff met with this group in October and November 2004 to review issues related to state and regional planning and new program review guidelines.

4. The HECB will develop a higher education reconfiguration plan for presentation to state policy makers and higher education administrators. The plan will address opportunities to expand student enrollment; assess the need to revise the roles and missions of existing institutions; and determine whether new colleges and universities are needed to meet regional and statewide needs.

By January 2005, the HECB, with assistance from stakeholders, will develop a planning process to assess student, employer, and community demand for higher education and options for meeting that demand.

By March 2005, the HECB and higher education stakeholders will assess options to expand enrollment capacity at existing campuses and through distance learning; through the transition of selected two-year colleges to four-year institutions; and through performance contracts between the state and public four-year institutions. The assessment also will consider the role of private colleges and universities.

By March 2005, the HECB will update its inventory of higher education resources, including locations, target populations served, enrollments, and programs offered at main and branch campuses and off-site learning centers.

By June 2005, the HECB, with assistance from stakeholders, will develop guidelines for the planning and growth of off-campus centers, branch campuses, and the transition of two-year to four-year institutions. These guidelines will be integrated with the program approval and review guidelines in a new Higher Education Resource Planning and Approval Policy.

By September 2005, the HECB will present a final plan to the governor and legislature, college and university governing boards, and other interested parties.

Performance measure

- Timely completion and distribution of reconfiguration plan and related reports.

Estimated costs

No new costs will be required beyond the \$205,000 provided to the HECB in the 2004 supplemental budget to assist in statewide and regional needs assessments.

Examples of ongoing related work

See earlier notes about activities surrounding the implementation of House Bill 3103 and House Bill 2707.